If the Sky Comes Falling Down (For You)
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If the Sky Comes Falling Down (For You)

by lurkinglurkerwholurks

Summary

or, 5 times Jason Todd saved his siblings... and one time they saved him.

——Can be read as a standalone——

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

Chapter 1

Jason didn't sleep much anymore. He'd always been a rough sleeper, his years spent in low-security public housing and then on the street grinding away at his ability to rest with ease. He slept lightly, his consciousness skimming just below the surface, ready to spring awake at the softest noise.

Moving to the Manor had helped some, after he'd assured himself that no one was going to scratch at his door or steal his shoes. The cold mornings had been the best, spent curled under a mound of the softest blankets imaginable atop a mattress so perfectly contoured to his bones that it'd felt like floating on the surface of a pool. He'd slept, truly slept, at the Manor.

Those days of rest were long gone. The Pit had done a number on his brain—intensifying and altering his emotions, erasing some old habits and dialing up others, leaving dark chasms where memories should be. It was like someone had jammed a stick in his skull and given his brain a good stir. Or maybe that was just the crowbar.

Ha.

The point was that when Jason slept, it was because he forced himself to sleep or because he crashed. He had done the former a few days ago, snagging a few terror-filled hours of sleep before jittery adrenaline lifted him off his busted couch and back onto the streets. Now he was careening toward the latter.

Jason leaned against the brick wall of the alley, safely enveloped in the shadows. He was better at wearing them now, stripped of the preschool-colored monstrosity of his past. Or maybe it just helped if your insides matched your surroundings. Whichever the case, he knew he was invisible and allowed himself a small moment of weakness.

His helmet thunked quietly against the bricks as Jason let his head fall back. It'd been a pretty good few days, all things considered. He was making progress with his budding criminal empire—splashy progress, as displayed on the crusting cuffs of his sleeves and the splattered toes of his boots, but also more subtle progress, too. The subtle form was harder, so much harder, but he knew its changes would be more permanent, in the long run. Splashy got people talking. Subtle got them bowing.

It was only by luck that Jason was still there when the bodies came crashing down the street. Bad luck, he would argue. He could hear them long before he could see them, their bodies preceded by the thunderous pounding of boots of asphalt and shouted curses. Three or four figures flashed by his little alleyway, a tight mob followed by a lone, slender figure in a streaming cape.

Jason flinched back instinctively, though he know he couldn't—wouldn't—be spotted. He waited, expecting to see more, but that was it. No one else followed the cape.

He figured out what was happening before the mask did. He could hear clearly as the group in front slowed, stopped, then waited to meet their caped pursuer. The mask, whoever they were, had been drawn off from the others, a foolhardy cub lured by bait. Now they were alone, outnumbered, and without help.

Jason had no intention of changing that. The voices caught his interest, though. Three were men, probably early 30s, vowels bent by Bowery cant. The fourth was younger, a teenager, he had to guess. Female. And though he'd heard her speak before in the careful neutral of the middle-class, the sounds being beat out of her now were Crime Alley crooked.

Pain had a funny way of resurfacing things like that. God only knew what Jason had wheezed out at different points in his life.

Cautiously, Jason stepped around the corner to watch. He wasn't even that curious—see one ruthless beatdown, you've seen them all—but this was his territory, and he didn't recognize the goons.

The girl put up a good fight. She was rough, no finesse, no real training. All knuckles and elbows and feet and knees. He spotted some of the Bat basics pop up in the way she ducked and spun, but she wasn't lithe like Nightwing or crafty like the Replacement. She was a brawler. And she was losing.

It sucked in an abstract way, the way it sucked that someone was going hungry halfway around the world, the way it sucked when a stranger missed his bus. It sucked, but it wasn't Jason's problem, and he couldn't really bring himself to care. B needed to learn to pick up his toys.

He was about to leave when the fight changed. It was a sudden shift, a tingling in the air that made the hairs on his arms stand up. Jason turned around and saw the mask flat on her back on the asphalt. She

was still moving, but was unable to get to her feet fast enough. One of the thugs, a wiry weasel of a man, knelt, straddled her hips, and lifted his hand into the air. The knife glinted in the amber streetlight and cast a shadow across the yellow emblem on her chest.

Jason's bullet cut through the meat of the weasel's hand, sending the knife flying with a spatter of blood and gristle. The man howled and rolled off the girl, clutching his hand, as the other two whirled to face the new threat.

"Howdy, boys." Jason had both of his weapons cocked and aimed.

One of them whispered his name. *Red Hood.*

Jason knew what they saw when they looked at him. He was big now, broad-shouldered and massive in a way he had only ever dreamed of being as a scrawny, malnourished street kid. His helmet was blood-red and gleaming, its angles sculpted to subtly suggest a skull. And his clothes were still stained with actual blood. He was an Alley myth, a nightmare with more bite than the Bat, because he wasn't afraid to do real damage. He was death.

"Woah woah woah, man," one was saying, his hands raised. "We're on your side."

Jason cocked his head in a way he knew made the helmet's eyepieces glint.

"My side?" he repeated, rolling the words around in his mouth.

"Yeah!" Thug #3 had found his voice. "We're all on the same side here. You ain't friends with no Bats." He gestured to the girl with just his eyes, careful to keep his hands raised and still.

"Gentlemen, I'm not friends with *anyone*." Behind his mask, Jason smiled a vicious grin with too many teeth, and he made sure that grin made it into his voice. "I don't know you, but I know your colors. You're Ibanescu's boys."

No one answered him. The screamer on the ground had subsided into a quiet whimper. The girl was conscious but still as she listened. And the two other goons watched him with eyes as round and white as moons.

"That's a problem for you, seeing as you're not currently on Ibanescu's turf. You're on mine." Jason rotated his wrists, making the muzzles of

his weapons shine. The men all swallowed in sync. The girl, wisely, kept her trap shut.

Jason eyed the trespassers, calculating the best path to take. He couldn't just let them go, wouldn't blow his reputation on one stupid night. But he didn't want to go through the hassle of murdering them, especially since he knew girl would feel honor-bound to defend them. Stupid birds.

"I like it when the punishment fits the crime," he mused aloud. "You step foot on my turf uninvited, I take your foot."

One of the men let loose a quiet whimper.

"But what I really want is for you to take a message back to your boss and to the rest of the scum like you." Jason considered a moment longer, then gestured with one of his guns. "You two. Raise your hands above your head."

The two uninjured men hesitated only a moment, then slowly crept their hands into the air. Jason shot cleanly through the palms of their right hands before anyone could so much as draw a breath. He waited for the screaming to ebb before speaking.

"Take your buddy and go. Tell your friends. Next mug I catch on my turf goes in my duffel."

No one moved, so Jason gave his guns a wiggle. "Scat."

The three men shuffled off as quickly as they could manage, drops of blood marking their path down the road and out of sight.

Jason didn't holster his guns, turned them instead on the girl. She hadn't moved from the ground, hadn't moved at all except to prop herself up on her elbows. She had a dribble of blood staining a line from her nose, across her mouth, and down her chin into her collar, and Jason was sure her uniform hid all kinds of bruises after the beating she'd received.

"I don't know you," he said, eyeing her speculatively. He knew the uniform, knew she ran with the Bat, but he didn't know what lay under the mask.

"Are you going to shoot me?" She sounded calm, but Jason knew better. She was just a kid, a stupid Crime Alley brat in over her head who was looking at his guns like she'd had too many experiences with

ones similar. He almost hated the Bat more for her than the Replacement.

You never learn.

"I should," Jason said, relishing the way a shade of color fled her face as he mulled. "Only seems fair, considering." He gestured in the direction of the thugs. "No one interferes on my turf. Not Ibanescu and not the Bat."

He wouldn't, though. It was one thing to let her get the snot beat out of her. And even if someone else had taken a shot at her, he wouldn't have minded. But he couldn't. Not in that suit.

"Get up," Jason growled and lowered his guns. One he holstered, the other he held by his side as he waited.

The girl staggered to her feet, wincing with one hand held to her side. Busted ribs, at the very least. Maybe even some internal bleeding. But she was on her feet. She was breathing.

They eyed each other warily, the girl swaying, Jason planted firm. She wiped her bloody nose on the back of her hand, sniffed, then flinched in regret.

"Thank you," she said, "for saving my life."

The words burned the back of Jason's throat, tearing through him like Pit sludge.

"This isn't about you," he spat, "so don't get it twisted. I'll shoot you myself the next time I see you."

She didn't pale the way he wanted her to this time. Instead, her eyes narrowed—blue, he noticed. Of course.

"Why then?" she asked.

He could lie. Make up something stupid. But he couldn't come up with anything, even a stupid, blatantly obvious lie.

"It's not about you," Jason repeated, his voice gravelly and rough. He pointed toward the yellow symbol on her chest, the symbol that, in the world he'd left, the world he remembered, belonged to someone else. "I owe her a debt. And now it's paid."

Jason was a murderer. A thief. A criminal. A drug lord. He had no

illusions as to his own goodness anymore, no hope for redemption or grace. But he had his values, the few precious things that he would not allow. One of those, it seemed, was watch a man restrain and stab a Batgirl while he did nothing.

The new Batgirl, this rough-talking blonde with more guts than brains, seemed to understand. She turned to spit a bloodied glob onto the pavement, then said, “Well, thanks.”

He watched her leave, a tomcat with its twitching tail watching a rival leave its territory. He waited until she was out of sight, until he was sure her custom-made boots had carried her out of his neighborhood and on her way home. Then he stepped back into the shadows and let them carry him onward.

Jason was tired, but the night was just beginning.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

> *They weren't on the same team. Being on a team implied cooperation. It implied trust. Jason didn't trust Dick Grayson as far as he could throw him. But sometimes the devil you knew was better than the devil you didn't, especially if the devil you didn't was a pack of literal hellhounds.*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They weren't on the same team. Being on a team implied cooperation. It implied trust. Jason didn't trust Dick Grayson as far as he could throw him. But sometimes the devil you knew was better than the devil you didn't, especially if the devil you didn't was a pack of literal hellhounds.

Crane had slipped free from Arkham again and, in a fit of unwelcome inspiration, had decided to take on a new theme. Scarecrow went literary. The various horrors released had been annoying but not Jason's problem. He didn't care about Gotham at large. His interests were restricted to the parts no one else wanted, and as long as the rogues and gangbangers didn't cross into his turf, he didn't cross them.

But then Crane released his Baskerville hounds on the Narrows, filling the neighborhood with beasts the size of motorcycles with foam-flecked maws and glowing green eyes. Jason didn't have a problem with dogs usually, but these nightmares were going after anything that moved—men, women, and children alike. He needed them off his streets.

The masks wanted the same thing. The Bat had shown a drop of sense for once in his bullheaded life and hadn't come to the Narrows himself. Instead, Nightwing had sprung from the shadows, all straight white teeth and corny jokes, just like Jason remembered. He'd swooped in, positioning himself at Jason's back between Hood and the circling dogs like it was where he'd always meant to be. Like turning his back on Jason was the natural thing to do.

Jason almost, *almost* wished for the Bat instead. At least B knew when to shut up. Then he thought of the Bat stomping through his

neighborhood, shrouded in scowls and an air of moral superiority, and wanted to vomit. He'd rather no masks at all, but if he had to have one, Nightwing was probably the best of a flock of bad options.

It was uncanny, though, how little the acrobat had changed. Despite notching a few more years on his belt, Nightwing was still the lithe, wisecracking circus boy Jason remembered. Quick fists and a quicker mouth, he kept up a steady stream of chatter as they punched their way through the pack. Maybe that was the real problem—not that Dick hadn't changed, but that the only thing that *had* changed was how he treated Jason, and his refusal to acknowledge that anything was different.

Dick had never liked Jason, not even when Jason was just a kid in need of a home. Dick hadn't even been around most of the time, preferring to lick his wounds and strut his stuff in Bludhaven. And when he had been around, he'd brought a tension into the city, into the Manor. At the time, Jason hadn't been able to decide what scared him more—that one of Dick and Bruce's fights would go too far, or that they'd make up for good and Jason would be back out on the street. He hadn't wholly believed Bruce would do that to him, not really, but irrational fears were a hard thing to squash.

A couple years and a grave later, it seemed the fear hadn't been so irrational.

"So do you think these are real dogs?" Nightwing was saying over the cacophony of howls. "Like, do you think Crane used real dogs and genetically engineered them, or?"

Jason gritted his teeth. He had a few claw marks that said they were real, but he wasn't going to encourage Nightwing's chatter or, god forbid, slip into *banter*.

"I just gotta know," Nightwing continued as he flipped over a snapping hound and kept running. "If these are lab-created algae monstrosities or something, that's fine, but I don't think I can kill a real dog. It's not their fault they are what they are, you know?"

Jason did know. As accustomed as he'd become to taking human life, the thought of snuffing out an animal did a number on his insides. Not that he'd ever admit that to anyone, especially Nightwing. Nor would his squeamishness prevent him from killing every last hound if doing so protected the Narrows.

To prove his point, he whipped out his tranquilizer pistol and shot two

rounds in the rump of a beast.

“Seems real enough.”

The dog yelped and faltered, but the remainder of the pack surging forward after the sprinting vigilantes. So far Hood and Nightwing had bagged four dogs along the length of the neighborhood, corralling and subduing each until Animal Control could come for them in the morning. Jason suspected the pick-up would be considered outside the normal duties for any other city unit, but Gotham’s Animal Control, like every other local government service, was used to responding to the unusual.

“I always wanted a dog.” Oh god, Nightwing was still talking. It had to be after 1 AM. They’d been at it for hours. Did he never stop? “B always said no. Didn’t think I’d take care of it. He got me a fish once, though. You ever have any pets?”

Jason blinked rapidly, trying to brush away the green haze that had flared across his vision at the mention of Nightwing’s mentor. It cost him to fight it, spending energy he didn’t have to spare.

He could let it in, something whispered in the back of his skull. Let the Pit take over. It would give him strength. He could wring the neck of the little birdie, finish the night in peace.

Jason sucked in a lungful of filtered night air and focused on reaching the end of the block. He was trying to resist the Pit more these days. Not because of any stupid morality or sense of guilt. He just didn’t like the idea of something else having control over him. If he killed, Jason wanted it to be because *he* chose to.

The dogs were gaining. Not by much, but enough that Jason knew their situation needed to change, fast. He was fit, maybe more than he’d ever been, but neither of them could keep up this pace forever. He had one tranq left in his gun. Nightwing, by Jason’s count, had two. There were three dogs left—great math, except one tranq wasn’t always enough to keep them down. He needed to keep ahead of the pack enough to find accessible high ground, get out of reach, reload his weapon, and finish off the last few dogs. Then maybe he could think about shooting Nightwing in the head.

“There,” Jason gasped, pointing to the fire escape halfway down the block. Here in the Narrows, fire code was less of a rule and more of a guideline, one that was often bypassed in order to offer a modicum of security to the already imperiled apartments. The ladder was the first

they had seen in three blocks, and though it was raised, adrenaline could make a body soar.

They raced together, Nightwing's prattle and jokes stripped away by the long sprint and the scraping clatter of claws on the asphalt behind them. It felt strange to be running next to someone else, to have someone with the same purpose and focus by his side. Jason tried not to think about it, even as they reached the ladder and he skidded to a halt and pivoted on his heel, turning to face the dogs as Nightwing launched himself into the air. Jason shot a dog in the meat of its chest, watched it fall with grim satisfaction, then scrambled up the ladder after Nightwing.

Their bandolier of tranquilizers was low, but it was enough to get the job done. Limbs trembling with exertion, they each popped off two more rounds into the remaining dogs, then watched from above as the hounds struggled, howled, and finally sank into unconsciousness.

Jason hoped this was the last of them, that the night was finally ending and he could scuff back to his dingy little apartment and fall into bed. No good showing weakness in front of anyone, though, so he kept his back straight and footsteps purposeful as he dropped back down to the street and pulled the reinforced nylon cord from his belt.

"Tie 'em up and leave 'em for Control?" Nightwing asked as he dropped to the ground as well, his feet silent as a shadow. Jason grunted in reply before squatting next to the closest dog and securing its muzzle and legs.

They weren't so awful-looking when knocked out. Horrifically big and muscular for mutts, sure, but with those awful glowing eyes closed, they were just dogs. Jason was glad he hadn't been forced to kill any.

"Hope this is the last of it from Scarecrow," Nightwing said as he knelt to secure his own dog. "I'm beat. Like, those weird flying monkey things were bad enough. I'll have nightmares for weeks. But after all that running, I don't even care. Knock me out and let me sleep."

Jason didn't answer. If Dick thought he was going to thank him, he was out of his mind. Something about Nightwing's voice, though… It made the skin between Jason's shoulder blades prickle, like an attack was coming. But Nightwing wouldn't…

"Probably wouldn't hurt to load up on some more tranqs." Nightwing kept his gaze on the knots he was tying and not on Jason, but Jason could feel the force of his attention like a fist to the kidneys. "We

could swing by the Cave, pick up some more."

There it was. Jason wished he had his helmet off so he could spit on the ground, do something to lessen the roaring tide rising up in him.

"Pass."

"Come on." Nightwing's voice had gone thin and wheedling, a whiny trick that worked on the Bat and the Bat alone. Never on Jason. Especially not now. "You can't do this forever."

It was a flash behind his eyes. A hairpin trigger in his gut. Jason's vision juddered to the right and then snapped back into focus as he whirled to face the other man.

"Do what." Not a question. A warning. The flare of an insect's spines, the rattle of a snake's tail. Danger, danger, back away, death is near.

"You need to be with your family. You need to—"

"Finish that sentence and I swear to god I'll put a bullet between your eyes."

He would. God help him, he would. There was a green fire crackling in Jason's veins, turning his blood into smoke and lightning, and voices just beyond his hearing that hissed for him to do it, do it, *do it*. If Dick finished that sentence, he'd pull the pistol from his belt and shoot a hole in that pretty little face. Even now, he was fighting the urge so hard that his knuckles were strained and cracking.

What did Dick think would happen? That he'd give his cheery little plea, and Jason would melt? Throw himself into Dick's arms for a bear hug and a cuddle? That they'd go waltz into the Cave together and the Bat would accept him with open arms? That the new Boy Wonder would welcome him with brotherly love?

And that was the thing, wasn't it. Jason had returned to Gotham with ample reasons to hate them both—the mentors who had abandoned and betrayed him. But he'd also made sure to give them reasons to hate him.

He had *tried to kill Robin*. And still they wanted him back. As if his deeds meant nothing. As if that boy they claimed to love meant nothing.

"Jay—"

The fuse crackled and hissed. Jason took a step toward Nightwing, fists clenched, muscles tensed. The Pit was too strong to stop, too strong to turn away. He had the slenderest thread of control, and he'd use it to beat the chirpy little birdie to a pulp. Choke him within an inch of his life. But Dick would be left with that inch. Only just.

The Pit was churning and the ghosts were wailing and Nightwing was still speaking, still trying to charm his way out, to talk his way through, and Jason was barreling forward—

—and there was a black shadow in the corner of his eye, a demon wraith with the glow of the damned and the howl of the lost.

Jason leapt, driving his shoulder into Nightwing's chest, forcing him back even as Jason twisted to tangle his gloved hands into fistfuls of fur.

Man and beast slammed into the concrete. It was unformed chaos—fur and claw and teeth and muscle and breath and pain. Jason's muscles strained to keep the snapping jaws away from his throat. His fingers flailed toward his belt. Teeth sunk past his jacket, into the pulp of his forearm.

Jason roared.

There was a shout from somewhere away and above, past the meat and the fur. The wall of muscle lifted briefly. Enough for Jason's free hand to release the dog's throat. Enough to pull the pistol from his belt and unload it into the cavernous chest of the beast. Six bullets, bam bam bam bam bam bam, one after the other.

The dog shuddered, then slumped, no longer a beast, just a body. Jason pushed it off him, felt the teeth slide free from his arm, and rolled to his feet. Nightwing stood over him, hands extended, face white as new snow. Unharmed.

Jason kept his voice low and his words clear so that Nightwing couldn't fail to hear a single one. "I have no family. You mean nothing. You *are* nothing. And if you get in my way, I'll kill you."

Jason shook himself out, brushing off Dick and the Bat and the whole affair as if he believed his own words. They were nothing. Nothing.

His arm was numb, but the pain would come soon. It always did. Jason tucked the injured limb against his chest, ignoring the way the blood slowly seeped into his shirt, warming his abdomen. He turned

to leave.

Nightwing's voice followed him, reaching like his still extended hand. "Then why did you push me out of the way?"

"Because if you're found with your throat ripped out in Crime Alley, the Bat will never believe it wasn't me." Jason hoped he sounded jaunty, lassiez-faire in the way of the most sinister rogues. Not like he was about to barf all over his own boots. "If I kill you, I want the credit fair and square. Just not tonight."

He even managed a dismissive wave over his shoulder before he disappeared into the shadows and out of sight. Out of reach of the birds and their meddling and the still bodies of the dogs that hadn't meant to do anything wrong.

It wasn't until Jason was nearing his safe house, blood still cooling on his skin, that he replayed his own threat and grimaced. When. He had meant *when*.

Chapter End Notes

Two birdies down. Three to go.

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

> *A hand, drenched in blood and backlit by another screeching bolt of lightning, smacked against the window. The hand stayed for a moment longer, then slipped down the rain-streaked pane and out of sight.*
>
> *Jason swayed on his feet, sucked forward by vertigo, as a hunched figure rose into view. It felt like falling into the past, staring at that pale face, that limp black hair, that waterlogged domino mask. Two thin-fingered hands strained against the window, pushed it up, and pulled the intruder over the sill. Then the figure's bloodless lips parted and croaked out his name.*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Death was meant to be the end. Even for those who believed in something next, something beyond, death was still the end of *this*, the end of the *now*.

As Jason was discovering, even when death wasn't the end, it was often *an* end for many things. The end of his family. The end of his home. The end of Jason himself, as who he used to be. Those were all bigger ends, and, in their own way, more expected. Grand endings spurred by the grandest ending of all. But there were other, smaller endings that still tripped him up, like walking down a familiar staircase in the dark only to find a step missing.

He couldn't walk in the park once the dew had settled, the smell of moist earth like hands dragging him down. He no longer flinched at the sound of metal scraping against concrete, but the noise still clawed down his spine. No more tight, enclosed spaces. No more loud, unexpected noises, if he could help it. And no more thunderstorms.

Jason hadn't minded thunderstorms as a kid. He hadn't reveled in them the way his mom had, but he couldn't remember ever being afraid. If anything, he'd loved to sit at the window and watch the lightning fork across the sky. Now all he could do was huddle on the floor of his tiny safe house and cuss himself out for not developing a debilitating alcohol dependence. Lessons from his mom and a

lingering cigarette habit that not even death could shake had scared him away from booze, but at the moment, being a sloppy drunk seemed a step up from what he was—a grown man shaking out of his own skin with every clap of thunder.

Jason pressed his hands over his ears as the next loud boom rattled his windows. “Stop it, stop it, stop it,” he hissed.

For a moment, he pictured himself, hunkered on the cracking linoleum, and anger blazed through his chest. Jason lunged to his feet, hands still pressed to his ears, limbs trembling. He wouldn’t cower like this. He was an *adult*. He was the *Red fu—*

A hand, drenched in blood and backlit by another screeching bolt of lightning, smacked against the window. Jason shrieked and staggered back, his vision temporarily seared by that red hand against the bleach-white sky. The hand stayed for a moment longer, then slipped down the rain-streaked pane and out of sight.

Jason swayed on his feet, sucked forward by vertigo, as a hunched figure rose into view. It felt like falling into the past, staring at that pale face, that limp black hair, that waterlogged domino mask. Two thin-fingered hands strained against the window, pushed it up, and pulled the intruder over the sill. Then the figure’s bloodless lips parted and croaked out his name.

Jason lunged forward. He jammed his hands under the boy’s arms to catch him before he hit the ground, then quickly backpedaled to drag the body fully into the apartment. After laying the boy on the linoleum, he slammed the window shut before whirling to glare down at the collapsed intruder.

“What the hell?” he demanded. “Wh—“ What happened? Why are you here? Why are you in my apartment? All good questions. But all Jason could manage was another wide-eyed “What the *hell*?”

The Replacement—Red Robin, Jason thought he was going by now—rolled onto his back, one hand pressed to his side. “If you could hold off shooting me, that would be great.”

That was not something Jason could promise. Though, from the look of the kid, someone had already taken care of that for him.

“You’re bleeding on my floor.” It was a stupid thing to say, but Jason was having a hard time concentrating. Outside, the storm was still howling, and inside, there was a lost bird exsanguinating in the

middle of his studio.

“Uh-huh,” the kid grunted, teeth flashing white as he grimaced. “Could you close the blinds? I don’t think I was followed, but…”

Jason growled as he yanked on the string and let the cheap slat blinds plummet down with a clatter of plastic.

“Who?” he demanded, bending down to grab a fistful of the kid’s uniform. “Who should I be expecting to come busting through that door? A door, by the way, that I’ve managed to keep discreet and safe from every bloodthirsty warlord in Gotham, including Big, Batty, and Brooding, *thank* you very much.”

“Some of Darkseid’s goons.” Red Robin hadn’t so much as blinked under Jason’s glare and now hung limp in his grip. “It’s fine, don’t worry about it.”

“Don’t—?!“ Jason let out a gasp of exasperation, then let the boy crumple back to the floor. “I oughta beat your ass, you snot-nosed little— How did you even know to come here?”

“Property records are public, and you’re not as slick as you think you are. It’s not rocket science,” was the droll response.

Red Robin’s blasé attitude wavered as he tried to roll onto his knees and failed. He stopped, panting, hand still clutched to his side and forehead pressed to the floor.

“I didn’t think you’d be here,” he admitted when he had his breath again.

Another boom rattled the windows and made Jason jump, but Red’s eyes were closed and Jason covered by turning away to stomp into the kitchen.

“Give me one good reason not to push you back out the window,” Jason shouted over his shoulder.

“It’s not worth the effort,” came the immediate reply.

Jason slammed the cupboard door to hide his choked bark of a laugh. He hadn’t known the kid was funny. Red had gotten off a snarky potshot or two before, but Jason had usually been riding high on Pit madness and the jokes hadn’t really landed.

He didn't *want* to know. Didn't want or need to know anything about the rich brat other than what he had taken. Jason hated that he even knew the Replacement's name.

Jason's scowl was firmly affixed as he returned to the heart of the apartment. The kid was still on the floor but had managed to sit up, lips pressed nearly nonexistent from strain. He looked up as Jason approached, eyes narrowed and wary beneath the domino.

Good. That was good. Jason had earned that respect. Jason had earned that fear. If any kid should look at him like the bogeyman incarnate, it was this one. Which was what made it strange that he'd flee to anywhere controlled by the Red Hood, much less one of his safe houses.

"Here." Jason plunked his first aid kit down on the floor next to the kid. "Patch yourself up and get out."

Another grimace fluttered across the boy's features and he swallowed, Adam's apple bobbing in his scrawny neck. Jason expected him to object, to beg for help, but instead the boy curled in on himself, then reached out and snagged the kit.

Jason retreated to the kitchen again. He had a battered box of Lipton lurking somewhere in the back of a drawer. It was awful and felt like more of a betrayal to his upbringing than the guns and the murder ever did, but he needed the soothing routine of tea more than he needed the tea itself. The activity also gave him a way to watch the little bird without being obvious.

As best he could tell, the Replacement had taken a bullet to the gut, but at a glancing angle with a clean through and through. That explained the copious amount of blood, but also meant the kid probably wouldn't die of internal bleeding or ruptured organs. Probably.

However, based on his controlled, mincing movements, Red had other injuries hidden beneath his uniform. Jason risked a squint as he poured the steaming water into a chipped brown mug. The kid was favoring his opposite shoulder, attempting to patch his shredded side with one hand. Difficult if theoretically doable, but the Replacement's movements were becoming clumsier and more sluggish by the minute.

Screw it.

Jason abandoned his tea on the counter and crossed the tiny

apartment. Though he'd made no attempt to silence his heavy footfalls, the kid didn't seem to hear him until Jason's shadow fell over the bloodstain on the floor. At which point Red startled so badly that he dropped the gauze in his hand and had to suck in a wheezing breath to fight the pain that was undoubtedly jolting up his side.

Jason reminded himself again that that fear was earned. It was good, for both of them. He wasn't sure why he couldn't bring himself to look the kid in the eye as he knelt down.

"Give it," Jason demanded, extending his hand. When the Replacement didn't move quickly enough, he snatched up the gauze and set it back in the kit, then bent and scooped the boy up into his arms.

"Wait!" the kid squeaked. "Don't throw me out! Stop!"

Jason scowled and tightened his grip so the boy couldn't squirm his way out into a hard fall. He was bigger than Jason had been at his age, with sharp elbows that caught Jason hard across the chest. Still too skinny, but in a way that seemed slender and genetic rather than malnourished. At least usually.

"The lighting in here is crap," Jason muttered. Not that the dim bulb in the bathroom was much better, but it at least gave him a little more to work with. More importantly, it would be quieter, away from the storm that continued to howl outside.

In the bathroom, Jason set the boy down on the dingy floor and ignored the way Red immediately pulled back and braced himself against the side of the tub, as if awaiting a blow. The room was tiny, barely large enough for them both to fit, and Jason loomed, his shadow falling over the boy's pale face.

"This is my night off. *One night* that I don't have to deal with body disposal," Jason growled, answering a question that wasn't asked. "I don't think that's too much to ask. So I'm going to patch you up, and then you're going to go die somewhere other than here, got it?"

His only answer was a wide-eyed nod, which was enough. Jason snagged the other kit from beneath the sink and reached again for his late-night intruder. This time, the Replacement allowed himself to relax and sagged against the cool tile floor, apparently convinced that Jason wasn't planning to kill him right that second. Or perhaps he'd bled enough that he no longer cared.

Jason ripped the side of the uniform open the rest of the way and got to work. It felt strange, working on someone else's wounds again. Alfred had done most of the heavy lifting in the old days, but Jason had been taught the basics and given the opportunities to practice, and the League had augmented that knowledge as well. The training served him well now, allowing him to debride, sanitize, and patch the ragged chunk of skin with ease.

Steady, Jay-lad. A sloppy hand can do as much damage as a slow one. In and out, nice and easy, just like I taught you.

Being dead should release you from hearing ghosts.

Unfortunately, Jason's experience also gave him time to notice other details. The Replacement had transitioned into Red Robin only a short time ago, but Jason's keen eye could spot mending all over the uniform. It was careful stitchwork, but less professional than Alfred's steady hand. Not Cave patched, then, though Jason wasn't sure why.

There were other troubling details, but the close scrutiny must have gotten under the boy's skin, because he shifted slightly on the ground and said, "So, uh, you come here often?"

He was *not* going to laugh.

"You mean you haven't scoped out my other safe houses?" Jason shot back.

"I mean, yeah, but I was trying to be polite." Red broke off and hissed as Jason hit a particularly tender spot. But then as soon as he caught his breath, he was back at it again. "Hey, do you think—"

"Uh-uh," Jason cut him off. "We're not doing this."

"What?"

"We're not bantering. You broke into my place and bled all over my floor. I hate you, you hate me, and we are *not* doing this."

The kid opened his mouth again, but another look at Jason's face forced his mouth shut with a soft snap of his teeth. The chatter must have been the only thing keeping the boy alert, because he began to sag against the tub soon after. Jason's hands followed him until he was fully prone, eyes closed and body still under Jason's care. His curled hands and stuttering chest were the only indications that he was alive at all.

That was good, too. Jason wasn't kidding about trying to avoid body disposal, especially in this weather.

Know thine enemy was a good motto, one Jason had both followed and ignored in equal extremes when it came to the Bat and his brood, so he couldn't pass up the opportunity to take another study of the boy up close. He didn't like what he saw.

The best looks Jason had gotten of Red before now were still shots Talia had provided, his own distant surveillance of the birds, and quick, dirty fights on darkened rooftops. So he didn't have the best grasp on what the kid normally looked like, but Jason was pretty sure he'd lost weight. The weight dump and the heavy bags under the kid's eyes might be attributable to recent mourning, but not the bruising. The blood loss had washed out Red Robin's complexion, highlighting not only the fresh bruising on his face and under his clothes, but also the deeper layers of mottled, fading bruises and cuts beneath.

Jason didn't keep tabs on the birds—didn't want to, didn't care, tried everything he could to stay out of their way and keep them out of his —but this seemed… wrong.

As far as he knew, neither the birds nor the new Bat had gotten into scrapes serious enough to warrant this much repeated damage. And Dick might have been a rotten, absent big brother to Jason back in the day, but it had seemed like Big Bird had overcorrected since Ethiopia, giving both the Replacement and the new Robin the lavish attention and focus Jason had been denied. Jason couldn't see Dick flaking out on that responsibility, not now, not after this last month. Not to mention Jason couldn't imagine any reality in which Alfred Pennyworth would let anyone in his care go around looking so undernourished.

He thought again of Tim's precise, careful movements when attempting to patch up his side, the way he had fumbled and bumbled his way through the simplest actions.

Jason's eyes narrowed.

He taped the last layer of bandage over the bullet's path, then reached out and lightly smacked the kid's cheek. Blue eyes startled open, pupils roving hazily until they fixed on Jason's frowning face.

"Where else were you hit?" Jason asked, then sharpened his glare further as the boy stared up at him blankly. Rather than ask again, Jason cursed softly under his breath and he began the check he should

have completed under the window.

It was only a few fraught seconds before he found the second bullet hole in the kid's shoulder. A few heartbeats more turned up the rest of the damage—a nasty bruise already forming over bully-punched ribs paired with matching bloody knees, all three likely from a hard fall; a dislocated pinky finger; and what Jason suspected were the faint but visible consequences of severe sleep deprivation.

The bullet in the boy's shoulder was the primary concern now that his side was temporarily under control, so that's where Jason turned first.

"I have pliers," Jason warned. Red's eyes had closed again, his body limp once more. Jason wasn't even sure the kid was still conscious, which was… not *worrying*. But not great. "It'll hurt."

Red Robin grunted but otherwise seemed content to nap on the bathroom's floor. Jason hummed tonelessly to himself as he rose and pivoted to the sink to disinfect his needle-nose pliers. He could leave the bullet in, but he had the supplies to patch the kid up, and if Red ran into trouble between here and the Manor and had to use his bad arm, the bullet could cause some nerve damage.

"I don't hate you." The words were fumbled like loose gravel trapped behind heavy lips, but Jason still caught them.

"What?" He looked over his shoulder.

"I don't hate you," the Replacement repeated.

His eyes were slits, cloudy blue glinting behind a thicket of black eyelashes. The adhesive on the left side of his mask had weakened, making the domino sit crookedly. Instead of making him look stupid, it just made him look… young. Out of his league. Over his head.

"I never did."

The weird thing about the Pit was the unpredictability of the madness it produced. It came on Jason sometimes in the heat of battle. And sometimes it didn't. It was most reliable when he was angry, when the green flashing across his vision matched the heat searing through his veins. But sometimes emotions close to anger were enough. Sometimes the pitch of his heartbeat and the galloping of his pulse was enough to make the sickly haze claw at the corners of his eyes. Like now.

Jason swallowed hard and turned back to the sink, the pounding in his ears drowning out the world like waves beating against a ship's hull. He took a breath, held it until his chest burned, used it to box out his tightening shoulders and straighten his curving spine.

When he knelt again on the floor, Jason's face was a sheer cliff, featureless and hard. When he slid the pliers into the Replacement's shoulder, he did so with no warning or gentleness.

The boy's cry of pain did nothing to bleed color back into the world.

Jason sucked in another breath and finished the job in silence.

When the shoulder was patched, the knees salved, and the pinky corrected, Jason pushed off his knees with a quiet grunt. Leaving the kid on the floor, he returned to the sink to wash his hands. Even a few weeks ago, he wouldn't have turned his back on any of the birds. Probably shouldn't now, despite the injuries the kid had racked up. But he was tired and sore and the hot water felt good on his hands. Jason watched the blood wash away in a swirl of pink suds and distantly wondered when he had stopped hearing the thunder.

Jason dried his hands and turned back around to the boy. A nudge to the ribs with his boot forced open drooping eyes.

"Yeah," the Replacement muttered before Jason could speak. "Time to go. I got it."

Red pushed himself to his feet and swayed as the blood left in his body redistributed itself. Jason didn't reach for him. He didn't reach for Jason.

The boy's domino had loosened further, a weakening from the torrential rain and, Jason suspected, carelessness. Now the black material hung awkwardly off the right side of his face. The boy sighed, a heavy, heel-deep sigh that rattled his bony shoulders.

"Sorry," he said. "Do you, uh…" He gestured at the dangling mask.

They stood in silence in the dingy little bathroom as Red reapplied the adhesive Jason offered to the inside of the domino. They had been face to face practically since he'd tumbled through the window, and Jason had figured he'd seen everything there was to see. He was wrong.

The kid looked so young without the mask. He'd looked young before,

of course. Jason mentally referred to him as “the kid” for a reason, but… Jason couldn’t remember ever feeling that small, that soft, that vulnerable. What had Bruce been thinking, sending children out to fight his battles? This wasn’t a warrior. This was an orphan dancing after the Piper.

The adhesive was fixed. The mask was reapplied. The child was boxed away and the soldier returned with a shaky breath and a straightening of narrow shoulders.

Jason followed him out of the bathroom. The storm had drifted away, leaving only the peaceful plinking of raindrops on the fire escape and the glowing light of a moon in a sky washed clean. Red’s blood was cooling on the floor, almost black against the yellowed linoleum, and faint streaks still clung to the window.

“Thanks for, uh… Sorry about the mess.”

A good man would ask him to stay. A good man would offer the couch, would offer anything to keep an injured kid from disappearing into a Gotham night. Jason hadn’t considered himself a good man in a long time.

Red Robin stepped over the puddle of his own blood, then raised the blinds and opened the window. His leg was already thrown over the sill when Jason spoke.

“Why did you come here?” The words wriggled free before he could catch them.

The boy blinked. Pain creased the corners of his eyes and his gaze flitted everywhere but Jason’s face. “I thought it was empty. I didn’t know you’d—“

“Why did you come here?” Jason repeated, cutting off the excuses before they could stink up the room further. Why here? Why not the Manor? Why not call Mama Wing to swoop in?

Red Robin looked out the window, across a narrow, trash-filled street, his face half-masked by shadow. For a breath, Jason thought he would leave without answering, but then he spoke, a hushed, pure truth offered in payment for stitches, needle-nose pliers, and a cold bathroom floor.

“I had nowhere else to go.”

Tim smiled, a crooked, toothless flash of sadness, as if he were tempted to mock his own pathetic situation before Jason could.

“Anyways, thanks for the help.” Red Robin gave an awkward little twist of his fingers, then hopped out the window and disappeared into the night.

Jason stared at the open window. A soft breeze stirred the blinds, casting swinging shadows across his face.

He thought of the bruises he had seen, layer upon layer like archaeological strata of recklessness and danger. He thought of the bloodied hand pressed against his window and the puddle congealing on his floor. He thought of new uniforms and of old uniforms filled with new bodies. He thought of flashing green eyes and sharp tongues. He thought of freshly turned earth capped in a somber limestone marker and a service he hadn’t attended.

Jason pulled the cell phone from his pocket. Somewhere out there was a Bat that needed to collect his bird.

Chapter End Notes

Three birds down, two to go.

If you like this specific chapter, you really should check out The Return but also Fix This: https://archiveofourown.org/works/34973626

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

> *Jason didn't expect to be the one to find Black Bat. Mostly because he hadn't been looking. He hadn't even known she was missing. Looking back, he wasn't sure anyone else had known either.*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jason didn't expect to be the one to find Black Bat. Mostly because he hadn't been looking. He hadn't even known she was missing. Looking back, he wasn't sure anyone else had known either.

He had been wrapping up his night after a quiet loop on patrol. Jason had strayed out of the forgotten parts of Gotham and into the more mundane districts. B was out of town—out of Earth's orbit, actually—so everyone else's territory had shifted accordingly to cover.

Jason wouldn't say he was on *good* terms with the Wayne brood, but at some point they had brokered an unspoken truce. They had stopped trying to kill each other (for the most part.) He would add an extra body to heightened patrols and needed muscle to the tenser showdowns. They would stop pretending to be sad when he declined yet another invitation to the Manor.

Gotham had, for once, granted him a peaceful night. The rats had stayed in their nests and the roaches stuck to the shadows. Jason could head home without wounds to mend, bruises to soak, or bullets to tweeze out of his armor. He was looking forward to settling into bed—not falling, not collapsing in a boneless and exhausted heap, but climbing in and burrowing under clean sheets. His toes curled in his boots just thinking about it.

But the downside to a peaceful night was that restlessness still rattled inside Jason's bones. Instead of turning his feet toward home and bed, he found himself wandering further afield. Jason so rarely moved out of his hardscrabble borough that it felt almost cleansing to walk new paths. He was still in Gotham, so the sky was still low with smog, the air was still pierced by the far-off cry of sirens. But then, he wouldn't have known what to do with a silent night and an empty sky.

His rambling feet led him to the local playhouse. Not the big, fancy

theater where Gotham's elite flocked and preened, but the shabby little neighborhood building where amateur thespians, school plays, indie concerts, and dance recitals cycled through regularly. Tonight was a performance night, some musical that he didn't recognize with period costumes and the local orchestra.

Jason slipped in to watch. Not in the back, past the grey-haired ushers in their pressed khakis and blue lanyards. No, he took to the skies like a proper former bird, slipped in under the eaves like a good alley rat. As much as he loved watching a good production from the cheap seats, crammed in with legs bent sideways and eyes trained from the stage, he loved watching from above even more.

This theater had prop storage over the box seats, a dark, quiet, dry little niche that Jason had used more than once as a bunk hole. He'd passed out here once or twice, swathed himself in magician's robes or jogger sweats while waiting for his clothes to dry, and sometimes fed the family of mice that lived in the southern corner. Tonight, he just wanted to sit quietly in the shadows and let the distant patter of stage banter work the jitters out of his fingers.

Black Bat was already there. Jason hadn't known, hadn't realized until he'd tripped over her in the dark, his boot catching on one of her legs. He'd righted himself, spinning about into a defensive posture, but the huddled shadow on the floor hadn't moved.

Below them, the audience roared with laughter.

Jason squinted. "Hello?"

His helmet had night vision. He could put it on. Should put it on. That's what B would have done. Jason's squint intensified, and he crept closer.

"Hey. Hey, buddy."

Jason hadn't been completely convinced it was a person he'd tripped over until he'd gone to poke the area he assumed was the shadow's shoulder and a slim hand had shot out of the dark and bent back his wrist. He hissed and wrenched free of the painful hold, but stilled his own hand before it could grab the gun at his hip.

Dark, gleaming eyes hooded with fatigue peered back at him. Jason frowned.

"Black Bat?"

The eyes blinked at him, lashes drifting slowly like feathers. Instead of his gun, Jason pulled out his phone and switched on the flashlight.

Black Bat lay curled on the floor, pulled into an almost inhumanly small ball. She was still in her uniform, the claustrophobic-looking mask she normally wore discarded in a crumpled mass a few feet away. Apparently knowing it was him was enough, because she shut her eyes against the beam of the light and tucked her head under her arms.

"Uh."

Jason wasn't sure what to do next. He was pretty sure the dainty-looking girl could snap his hand clean off his wrist if she wanted to. That said, if he left her here, something happened, and B found out, an amputated hand would be the least of his worries.

"Are you hurt?"

She had to be, to look this bad. But he didn't see any puddles of blood or tears in her uniform, at least not by flashlight.

"Look, I need to check you out. I'm not going to hurt you, so just… return the favor."

He wasn't sure how much she understood. No one had given him the Black Bat communication seminar. But he did his best to keep his hands visible and his body language open, the same way he would with a scared kid or a hurt animal, and it seemed to help. The girl let him check her for injuries, of which there were none. However, her forehead was so hot he was surprised it wasn't glowing.

Jason muttered a curse that was lost in the high, clear song rising through the floorboards.

"I'm calling Dick," he decided aloud and flipped off the flashlight. Let Big Bird take care of the sickie. He'd pass her off and that would be the end of his involvement.

Black Bat's small hand shot out and gripped him for the second time that night, her fingers digging into the meat of his forearm. It was only thanks to the steadying weight of years of training by the streets, Batman, and the entire League of Assassins that Jason didn't jump out of his skin.

"No," she rasped, and the hairs on Jason's arms rose. He'd only heard

her speak twice before, and to hear it now felt more alien and wrong than receiving a hug from the gremlin.

Carefully, Jason tried to pry her fingers off.

“You’re sick. You need—“

“No.”

“Look, I can’t—“

“*No.*”

She was a tiny thing, no bigger around than his leg, barely reaching his shoulder on tiptoes, but the word carried enough force to rock Jason back on his heels. Or maybe it was the wild look in her eyes.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Jason breathed. He didn’t dare try to restrain her, but her fingers were scrabbling at his arm, his jacket, his shirt.

“No,” Black Bat repeated. “No.”

“No *what*?” They had to be quiet. The audience below them had hushed and the ongoing monologue might not be enough to drown out a fight. But he had to know what she meant.

“If you don’t want Dick, I can call Alfr—“

“*No.*”

So it wasn’t about Dick, then. Was it about the family? Had there been a fight? But a fight usually meant anger and bitterness, and Black Bat was hard to read even without the mask, but Jason wasn’t seeing any of that.

Jason paused, considering. He could call Dick anyways, have him come pick up his missing bird. Be free of it all.

Tick off Black Bat. Betray her trust, which she seems to have in you for some reason. Earn an enemy for no good reason. And put yourself on Dick’s side of whatever this is.

Well, that was no good. No calling Dick. Or Alfred, even. The baby birds would be beyond useless. No one to call, but as much as Jason tried to keep himself unattached, he wasn’t a total monster. She was sick, and he couldn’t leave her in the playhouse storage, no matter how cozy it was.

“Okay,” Jason murmured, over and over until the girl let herself slump to the floor again. Once his arm was free, he tried to remember the signs for what he needed to say. In the end, he managed to cobble together a pastiche of true signs and exaggerated hand gestures.

You’re sick. Bad. I take you away. Safe.

“Safe”, at least, he knew he’d gotten right. Whether she would believe him was another story entirely.

To Jason’s surprise and relief, his word seemed to be enough. Black Bat let him place the discarded mask in her lap and then—with the same care one might give a wounded panther—lift her body into his arms. She rested her head against his chest, and Jason swore he could feel the heat radiating off her even through his armor. Thankfully, with her mask off and her cape pulled snugly over the rest of her costume, she wouldn’t be instantly recognizable as one of Gotham’s most terrifying protectors.

The trip down from the eaves was considerably more fraught for Jason than the trip up had been. Thankfully, he had experience toting bodies from any number of different heights, and she was still cognizant enough not to fall off his motorcycle, if only just. He was lucky he had a place nearby. It wasn’t really a safe house, not a true bolthole in any Batty sense of the concept, but it would do.

Jason was keenly aware of his new charge slumped against his back the entire drive to the hideaway. She’d been in town and a Wayne for long enough now. They were allies on the street, usually. B would even call them family. (Jason would *not*.) Jason didn’t know how to classify her.

He knew less of her than the others. Dick and Damian were pretty vocal about what they thought and felt. Tim less so, especially to Jason, but they had an understanding of sorts. That Black Bat was a girl didn’t matter so much, though it was strange to think of Bruce with a daughter. That she was Asian (Chinese, he was pretty sure he’d heard) didn’t matter at all. That she didn’t speak most of the time, well, that made her more like the rest of the family than anything else Jason could think of.

In the beginning, she’d made him nervous. The new kid was a variable he couldn’t plan for, an unknown entity with a skill set that made the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. She was a dainty pixie who could become a thug’s worst nightmare without mussing a hair on her

head.

The first time he'd seen her in action, he'd wondered if Bruce's on-again, off-again relationship with Selina had finally come home to roost. (Only later did he learn that, at least when it came to surprise offspring, he'd been worried about the wrong baby mama. Go figure.) That she could narrow those doe eyes of hers and see straight into the heart of whatever Jason most wanted hidden meant he'd spent a lot of effort to avoid her when possible.

However, the current truce with the birds extended to Black Bat, who more than earned her share of the peace. They would nod to each other across a brawl from time to time. He'd stopped some of the more industrious goons from ganging up on her. She'd stopped him from getting stabbed once or twice. She was the only one he was willing to sit on a rooftop with, the only one who wouldn't drive him up the wall with nervous chatter or judgmental grunts.

He respected her but kept his distance. He had no idea how she felt about him.

Jason had left his helmet at the theater. With his jacket zipped up, he looked—he hoped—like a regular neighbor back from a night's ride as he pulled into his parking spot. Still, this wasn't Crime Alley, which meant strapping young men carrying possibly incapacitated young ladies weren't as easily overlooked. He bundled his charge up and hurried her inside.

The little brownstone was nothing much to look at. It was family owned, with the cheery Mrs. Davies and her son still living on the lower level, Mr. and Mrs. Icho on the second level, and Jason at the top. The apartment was meant to be just another investment, a secret space stored up the same way he used to hide food in the nooks of his room and the pockets of his clothes. Jason wasn't even here the majority of the time.

But it was his. It was as safe a place could be in Gotham. It was out of the broken bottle streets of the Narrows. And it was one place he thought the birds didn't know about.

Until now, Jason thought grimly.

They made it through the front door and up the stairs without raising an alarm. After some fumbling, Jason managed to get the apartment door unlocked. He moved quickly and fluidly into the space, kicking the door shut behind him even as his elbow flicked on the overhead

light. He hesitated only for a moment over the sheeted couch before pivoting and carrying the sick kid to the bedroom and set her on his cool, clean bed. She lay there, fever-bright eyes glinting up at him warily. Jason stared back, then retreated into the bathroom to the find thermometer. He found it and pocketed it along with a bottle of ibuprofen before returning to the bedroom.

Jason sat on the very edge of the bed. He touched the thermometer to the girl's lips and waited for her to accept it, then waited some more for the display to change. When it beeped, he pulled the thermometer out of her mouth and frowned at it.

103.1. Not great.

"How long have you been sick?" Jason asked.

Under his stare, she gave a listless shrug.

Jason fought an eyeroll. Of course. He'd had such high hopes for Black Bat, but of course she would be just as stupid as the rest of them about working through illness.

"You're pretty sick," Jason tried again. "Are you sure I can't call…"

But there it was again, the wild shake of the head, the thinly pressed lips. Jason dropped the subject. For now.

"Here. You need to take two of these." Jason shook out the pills from the bottle, then dropped them into her hand. "I'll get you some water."

Jason left her and returned to the kitchen, shucking off his jacket, armor, and boots as he went until he was left with his undershirt, pants, and socks. He put on the kettle, then set about digging in the cabinets for a clean glass.

He felt more sure of himself now, letting old movements he'd long forgotten resettle in his limbs. This wasn't his first time caring for someone. Jason wasn't a helpless only child like the others. His death might have scrambled his brain, but he could still remember preparing hot bowls of soup for his mom. If he closed his eyes and held out his hand, he could feel the soft strands of her bangs as he pushed them off her sweaty forehead, as real and as visceral as a phantom limb.

He could do this. He could take care of that girl in the other room, just for tonight. He wasn't a child anymore.

Jason put the tea on, then returned to the little bedroom with a cold glass of water.

Black Bat was gone.

“Black Bat?”

No answer. Jason set down the glass on the bedside table and went to the window. Still closed and locked.

“Hey.” He whistled softly, not knowing what else to do, then slowly knelt and peered under the bed. No one looked back.

Their contact was mostly limited to the streets. Personal details were kept off the radio chatter, or were supposed to, anyways.

Jason tried to remember her name.

As he scanned the dimly lit room, he remembered an outing a few months back. It had been Alfred’s birthday, and the old man’s one request had been for his family to join him for a stroll at the city’s botanical gardens. They had all come, even Jason, and Jason had watched the family, these virtual strangers, interact together under the sun and out of masks.

Bruce had been in the middle of a conversation with Dick, when from above came a soft shower of cupped white blossoms. Bruce had paused his conversation, bearing the unexpected interruption stoically, then had slowly tilted his head backward until he could stare up into mirthful brown eyes peering from the limb above the walkway.

He had sounded like a midnight toll, his voice deep and even, but Jason—though out of practice with the deciphering of Gotham’s only living Moai—caught the way Bruce’s seemed to brighten as he spoke the girl’s name.

“Cassandra.”

The name hovered in the air about the bedroom, waiting for a place to land.

Jason licked his dry lips free of the sensation of a new name and tried again.

“Cassandra?”

He found her in the closet, pressed tightly against the back wall. It was an empty little nook except for an unfavored spare shirt hanging forlornly on a thin wire hanger. The backlighting from the bedroom cast Jason's shadow over her face, blotting out her expression, so he squatted down to eye level.

The girl's—Cassandra's—cheeks were unnaturally bright with color, a conflicting mess of fever flush and a queasy green. Her lips had gone chapped and white. Based on the way she kept squinting, Jason would wager she was battling a nasty headache to boot. She had begun to shake, probably from fatigue and chills and—

Jason ducked his head low and leaned, putting himself nearly nose to nose with her. Fatigue and chills, maybe, but it was more than that. She was scared. He could see that now, which either meant she wanted him to see it, or she was so sick that she couldn't mask it any longer.

He sat back, rocking off his heels and onto his rear with a huff. Jason set the glass of water down and slowly raised his hands to show they were empty and harmless.

She was just a kid. He would forget, sometimes, with the birds, but in the end, they were all just kids. And Jason might not know her backstory, but given her training and B's general track record with strays, whatever her story probably wasn't a good one.

Red Hood could take the night off.

"Hey," Jason murmured. "You're Cassandra, right?"

She didn't respond, so he continued. "I'm Jason. I… I mean, we've never really met. I guess."

He felt stupid. Jason didn't know how to talk to a bird without sarcasm or spite, especially not a bird like this.

"I'm not going to hurt you." Jason tried to infuse sincerity into every syllable, into the slant of his shoulders and the turn of his mouth. "You're sick and I just want to help. Here."

He used his socked foot to carefully push the glass of water into the closet and was relieved to see her take it.

"You're scared." At the words, Cassandra's red-rimmed eyes flickered above the rim of the glass to watch him. "You don't need to be. The

others don't know about this place. If you don't want them to find you, they won't."

Jason wasn't sure how much of that she understood, and not just because of the language barrier. With a fever that high, who knew what she was seeing or hearing right now.

Regardless, his words, his promise, seemed to mean something to Cassandra. He wasn't sure why. A promise from Alfred was worth a hundred times his. Even a promise from Dick meant something. It could be relied on. No one relied on Jason for anything, except maybe to make trouble.

Whatever the reason, some of the tension seemed to slacken from Cassandra's shoulders, though the air about her was still brittle with awareness, and she downed the pills and the water.

"Go slow," Jason warned. "Too fast and you'll puke it up in a half hour."

She slowed. He waited until she was finished, studying her all the while. The light was only a little better in the closet than it had been in the prop niche, but it was enough for Jason to see how wan Cassandra had become. Wan and damp. Her black hair hung in limp, greasy sheets and lay slicked across a pale, sweaty forehead. Jason wondered just how long she'd been wasting away up in that alcove.

The timer for the tea beeped, and Jason went to fetch the kettle. He had just finished pouring a cup and setting it on the tray next to a sleeve of saltines when from the bedroom came a soft but mad-sounding scramble. He reentered in time to see Cassandra take a scuffling dive toward the trashcan, one hand clapped over her mouth.

With his mother, Jason would have rubbed small circles on her back and murmured soothing words. With Cassandra, he did neither. His life wasn't a soft one. Even though the others were trying to mend the rift, Jason's days were more often filled with punches and kicks than caring touches, given or received. It was just his way, and had nothing to do with the way other people felt too warm now, their bodies burning summer sidewalk-hot against his grave-cold skin.

But, despite all that, it felt right to kneel next to Cassandra on the stained carpet and scoop her hair away from her face and off her neck.

When she had finished vomiting and sat back from the can, Jason dropped her hair and stretched his full length to snag the water glass

from the closet.

“Rinse and spit,” he told her, then mimed the action to be safe. She did, then took the second pair of pills he offered and reluctantly swallowed them to make up for the ones she had regurgitated.

Jason heaved himself off the floor, careful to give Cassandra as wide a berth as he could manage on his route to the dresser. He’d been lucky that she hadn’t taken offense or fright to him lifting her hair. He didn’t want to press his luck again.

When he returned with a small armful of piled clothes, Cass frowned up at him. Rather than explain right away, Jason set them down and disappeared into the bathroom, only to reemerge again with a damp washcloth.

“Wipe your face, hands, and neck,” he said, gesturing toward each aforementioned body part with the rag. “Then get changed. You’ll feel better. That uniform is keeping your temperature up.”

Not to mention it smelled awful. The best antiseptic technology in the world couldn’t mask the smell of days-old fever sweat.

Jason had planned to leave and pour himself a cup of the tea that waited in the kitchen, but instead he had to stay and help. Cassandra had exhausted herself in the dash to the trashcan, and so Jason found himself helping his whatever-she-was change on the same night that they were officially introduced.

It was a good reminder that they all had scars. Jason’s had been washed away by the Pit, and he spent his months in Gotham slowly, painstakingly collecting them again. He figured he could stop once his outsides matched his insides. Or the grave took him again. Or both.

Cassandra was more typical and wore hers on her skin.

Some of them, anyways, Jason thought grimly as the scars disappeared underneath the ratty old sweatshirt he’d pulled from the drawer. Given her fears, he didn’t doubt that more lurked as deep as his own.

Jason thought on those scars as he helped Cassandra back to the bed. He mulled over the thin, streaky, white ones, the pink, knotted ones, the pocked, faded ones. He dove deep into his memory, sifting and sorting and trying to remember, as he took the bin to the bathroom and rinsed it clean.

He had suspicions and finally dared to put voice to them when he returned to the bedroom and set the clean trashcan by the bed.

“You trained with Lady Shiva.”

Cassandra had begun to relax, or at least not fight as hard against the exhaustion from her every pore, but the name made her sit bolt upright.

Jason waved her down.

“Safe,” he reminded her, as gentle as he knew how to be, which wasn’t very at all. “From her and everyone else. But I’m guessing she’s the reason you don’t want the others to know you’re sick.”

The League wasn’t known for its compassion. Jason had seen some of their reactions to perceived weakness in his time there, and from a few oblique mentions from Dick, he gathered that the little gremlin in the Robin suit could say even more. For Cassandra, who hadn’t been the heir apparent, Jason wagered being caught sick or hurt had been even worse for her.

Jason turned away and began to gather the layers of armor he’d stripped off on his way to the kitchen. He needed the opposite of thinking. He had forfeited his early, peaceful night by going to the theater, and he didn’t want to add more turmoil now.

But there was a voice in Jason’s head—a dry, insistent, starchy voice—pushing him to do things he didn’t want to do and say things he didn’t want to say. The more stubbornly Jason tidied, the more insistent the voice became, though it never once grew louder.

Alfred Pennyworth was worse than the Pit.

“You know they won’t hurt you for being sick.”

Jason dumped his boots next to the wall and risked a glance up. Cassandra was watching him from the bed. She had Bruce’s flat stare, and it gave him the creeps.

“Look,” Jason sighed, “B and I, we don’t… he… There’s a lot we still don’t agree on. I don’t even like the guy most of the time.”

Jason dragged his fingers through his hair and forced himself to speak the truth. “But you know he would never… if he finds out you’re sick and were too scared to go home, he’ll be really upset. He won’t ever

admit it, but he will be."

Bruce could *never* find out. Not because Jason cared that the big guy would be devastated. He didn't care about that at all. But Bruce would dial the Brood Factor up to 11, both in the Gothic hero sort of way and the mother hen sort of way, and would make life in Gotham utterly unbearable.

"Bru—" Cassandra's voice cracked, and she grimaced. Jason waited, perched like a bird on a wire.

Bruce is safe. Cassandra signed. **But he is not here.**

Jason was drawn in, despite his own best efforts. He stepped closer to the bed, hands jammed into his pockets.

"You think Dick would…"

Ridiculous. The whole idea was ridiculous. Jason could see Damian trying something if he thought Cassandra had her guard down, but Dick? Even Tim, no way. Those sops were all about family.

Cassandra shivered and pulled her hands deeper into the sweatshirt sleeves, then popped them out again to sign, **They are scared of me.**

Wasn't everyone?

"They respect you," Jason countered, but Cassandra was already shaking her head.

They are scared of me, she repeated.

Jason considered what it must be like for her, to be in a family where everyone was just a little afraid of you, held you just a little bit apart. He could commiserate. The difference was she wanted to belong.

"You let me take you here. Why?"

He was just as wary of Black Bat as the others, but she'd trusted him anyways. It didn't make sense. He was the one who shot people. He was the one with a duffel bag full of heads. If anyone should worry her, it should be Red Hood.

Jason found he was holding his breath as he waited for the answer.

Cassandra scrunched her fingers up in the sleeve of the borrowed sweatshirt and rubbed the fabric against one tired eye before piecing

together in slow, halting speech, “They have rules. Rules…”

She rubbed her fingers together, as if crumbling an invisible substance, and then scattered the imaginary pieces across the bed.

Jason opened his mouth to speak. He didn’t know what he planned on saying, his brain hadn’t caught up yet, but Cassandra cut him off.

They lie, she signed, **about what they will do. What they won’t do. Lie to themselves. The little one doesn’t, but is learning. They do. You don’t.**

What? Jason lied. He lied all the time. He liked to be unpredictable.

Cassandra was shaking her head again, reading his denial. **You know what you can do. You don’t lie to yourself about that.**

“But…” How did that translate into him being safe for her? If her fever-fried brain could suspect *Dick* of using her sickness against her, why would she trust Jason not to do the same?

“You come.” Cassandra’s face gave the suggestion of a smile in the way her jaw softened and her eyes sagged. “We call. You come. You always come.”

Jason didn’t know what to say to that. Her face was starting to take on a greenish tint again, and he jumped on the excuse.

“You should get some rest.”

He cleared his throat, trying to rid himself of the strange, prickly feeling growing larger behind his Adam’s apple. This, more than anything, was why he had avoided Cassandra Cain. She saw too much. Knew too much. Sometimes she knew things even he didn’t.

Jason dragged the trashcan next to the bed, then picked up the tea and the crackers from the tray he had abandoned on the dresser and set them on the end table. He wet another rag in the bathroom and returned to the bedroom, determined to put it in Cassandra’s hands and retreat to the living room for the rest of the night.

But she was still sitting up in bed, wilting more by the second but unwilling to close her eyes.

Jason frowned. “What are you doing?”

He pointed to the pillow in case she had misunderstood. “Lay down.

Go to sleep."

Cassandra shook her head. She touched one finger to her temple. "Too loud."

That he understood too well. Fever had a way of taking normal thoughts, loud enough on their own, and making them run wild, distorting, stretching, and repeating until they circled and cackled like a pack of Harley's hyenas.

Jason sighed. He placed the folded washcloth in her hands, then lifted her hands to her forehead so that the cloth lay flush against his burning skin.

Then he left the room.

Jason returned a few seconds later, a slender, battered paperback in one hand, a folding chair in the other. He set up the chair next to the bed, then placed the book on the chair's seat.

"Lay down," he repeated quietly, resting his hands on Cass's shoulders to push her down against the mattress. He was gentle. She let him.

He could feel Cassandra's watchful, unblinking, red-rimmed eyes as he pulled the cool, clean sheets and the thin, soft duvet up almost to her chin. Jason blinked, clearing away blonde hair and sunken cheeks from his vision until only black strands and a young face remained. He could do this in his sleep. Had done it in his sleep, almost, many times.

But it wasn't his younger self he felt like as he folded himself down into the plastic chair and picked up the book.

Jason wasn't sure if a book would work for Cassandra, who had a complicated, ongoing struggle with the spoken word. But he could still remember fragments of long nights, trapped under the sweaty grip of an illness, when a steady, rumbling voice had read to him in the dark and lifted the hand just enough that he could slip away into sleep.

"Close your eyes," Jason murmured.

She would have to drink more later. Eat something. Take a real bath. He would need to call Dick. Call Bruce. Grab a bite of his own. Pass out on the lumpy couch. But those were all tomorrow's problems.

Jason cleared his throat and began to read.

Chapter End Notes

Four birds down, one to go... Any bets on how it happens for our remaining Robin? :)

Also, to note on Cass's signs, I know ASL does different things than English on things like verbs and articles and such, so her signs are not transcribed word for word. As with any good translation, some finessing was done to smooth out the grammar. (Jason, on the other hand, didn't even fully use ASL, which is why his signs are so crudely done.)

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

> *Sometimes talking with Damian was like continually having someone stick their leg into the conversation with the sole purpose of tripping you. Even if you managed to step over it, you never knew what, exactly, you were stepping into.*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Damian was waiting for him when Jason came home. Jason shucked off his shoes and turned his back on the boy to hang up his jacket in the hallway closet.

The birds had—to Jason's dismay—become more comfortable with dropping by unannounced. He had mostly given up trying to keep his safe houses a secret from the family. No matter how hard he tried, a few weeks after securing a new location, he'd wake up to find Cass watching cartoons on his couch or come home to find one of the boys rooting through his fridge or Dick showering in his bathroom. The subterfuge wasn't worth the effort anymore.

Still, he wished they'd at least give him a courtesy text or something.

It wasn't until Jason turned back around with a sigh that he noticed the duffel bag by Damian's feet.

"Planning a sleepover?"

Damian lifted his chin. "I know you have ways of contacting my mother. I need to speak with her."

So not a sleepover, then. That was a relief.

Jason wasn't even going to touch the assumption that he knew how to reach out to Talia al Ghul. Instead, he said, "Mother's Day isn't until May, gremlin."

He brushed by Damian and walked into the kitchen to rummage for a clean cup. Jason and Damian weren't close, but he'd picked up enough to know that Damian was more likely to talk without the full weight of a person's attention.

“This is not a social call,” Damian snapped as he followed Jason into the kitchen. “I need…” he hesitated uncharacteristically, then finished, “I need her to take me back to Nanda Parbat.”

Sometimes talking with Damian was like continually having someone stick their leg into the conversation with the sole purpose of tripping you. Even if you managed to step over it, you never knew what, exactly, you were stepping into.

“Spring break’s in April,” Jason answered. He raised his glass of water to his lips, then paused. “Or are you finally over the target practice cape?”

Damian scowled. “It is an honor to be Robin. A privilege.”

Jason shrugged, took a sip, then said, “Then you’ve realized B’s an idiot. I get it. Happens to all of us eventually.”

“Father is NOT an idiot!” Damian’s explosion was predictable. The way his chin dipped and his gaze fell to the floor immediately after was less so. “I have performed below expected standards with no hope for immediate improvement. I am the idiot. I do not deserve the mask, and so I must relinquish it.”

Jason’s response was, he had to admit later, not thought through. “You think you’ve failed so you want to go back to *Talia*?”

Damian’s gaze snapped up to Jason’s. “Do you think she will not take me back?”

This kid.

Jason sighed. This wasn’t his job. It was Bruce’s job or Dick’s job. Heck, even Cass or Tim were better qualified. They *lived* with the kid. They were family. But Jason was the one here.

He gestured toward the bar stools pulled up to the breakfast counter. “Sit.”

Damian abandoned his duffel and climbed up onto the stool, hands clenched atop the counter.

Jason leaned against the counter across from him. “Explain. But keep it short.”

Damian’s face scrunched, constricting and puckering as if he’d tasted

something foul. It was more adorable than Jason would admit to anyone ever.

“You were not supposed to ask questions,” the boy sulked. “Either you can contact my mother or you cannot.”

“So I’m an unpredictable S-O-B,” Jason said with a shrug. “You want my help, you tell me what’s going on.”

Damian glared at him, testing for weakness. Then, abruptly, his face crumbled and he looked down at his hands. “I am having difficulty in my studies,” he mumbled.

“Like you got an A- on a pop quiz?” Jason snorted. “Forget it. B won’t care.”

“No!” Damian growled in frustration and scowled at the counter as if it had insulted his heritage, then mumbled, “‘Mf’ling’clss.”

Jason squinted. “Wanna try that again?”

“I’m failing a class.” A slow, burning flush crept up Damian’s neck. “Report cards will be sent out after next week’s test. I have run the calculations, and there is no way for me to raise my grade to an acceptable level. I have failed.”

“Failing,” Jason repeated. “Like, *failing* failing?”

Damian sneered. “Yes, Todd, very astutely worded. I am, as you put it, *failing* failing. My current scores place me at a D- on this city’s grading system. Father will learn of my ineptitude once the reports are delivered, and he will take me off patrol.”

And that would be tragic to Damian, but not as much as weathering Bruce’s disapproval. And Bruce *would* disapprove.

Fine. Looked like it was going to be Jason’s problem after all. Who better to walk a kid through dealing with Bruce Wayne’s disappointment than the ultimate disappointment?

Jason ran a weary hand across his face, then asked, “What class is it?”

“History.”

Weird. Jason knew the kind of education Damian had been given in the League, and while it had skewed heavily toward more practical subjects like languages, physics, and stabbing, they wouldn’t have

shirked on giving him the necessary foundation in world history.

“So what’s the problem? Did you piss off the teacher?” Jason joked.

To his surprise, Damian nodded soberly. “I believe so. He supports the Anglo-centric, pro-colonization dogma of many Western educators. We have disagreed in the past.”

Knowing Damian, “disagreed” was likely a euphemism for “escalated to a screaming match and possibly drew blood.” On both sides. The kid had that effect on people.

Jason grimaced. “Have you talked to your principal?”

Damian sniffed dismissively. “Headmaster Franklin and I are not on the best of terms. He says that my grades are decided by my teachers and that he will not interfere.”

That didn’t seem right, but Jason filed away the information for later. “What about a tutor?”

Damian’s shoulders bowed miserably. “Then Father would know.”

“You really haven’t told anyone,” Jason marveled. “Not even Dick?”

“He has been preoccupied with his friends as of late,” Damian said, meaning the Titans. “And he has been working overtime in Bludhaven. I did not want to trouble him.”

Jason bit his tongue to keep from pointing out that Damian vanishing to live with his mother would trouble Dick at least a little. Instead, he sighed again.

“Alright, so, the trick with the stick-up-the-butt teachers is to game them. You don’t have to agree with them. You just have to pretend like you do, just enough to get through the class.”

Jason held up his hand and waved down Damian’s enraged objections. “I know. I know. It sucks. And it’s not fair. But unless they’re blatantly dogging your work, you’re screwed, kid. Do you have any of your papers or tests or anything on you?”

Damian nodded and hopped off the stool to rummage through his duffel. “It’s all on the grading portal.”

He tapped through his tablet and handed it over to Jason before climbing back up on the stool.

“In *my* day we did everything on paper,” Jason grumbled under his breath. Nothing could make a person feel old like technology. Except maybe playing eye-trombone to find the right depth to let him read the screen in lieu of the glasses he hadn’t worked up the nerve to buy yet. Growing up *sucked*.

But sure enough, all of Damian’s papers and test scores were digitally uploaded to the portal, along with his teacher’s notes about participation and behavior. Jason flicked quickly through the screens, then slowed down. The more he read, the deeper his frown became.

Some of what he read made sense. There were some small deductions, nitpicky things Jason would have let ride but were still within a teacher’s purview to mark. Those, along with some of the notes regarding Damian’s arrogance and know-it-all interruptions, formed an outline of a strict teacher who needed a hobby but otherwise was okay.

But some of the other stuff… Some of the points Damian was docked were for matters of opinion or just plain wrong. And some of the notes were… Jason’s brows furrowed deeper as he chewed on the inside of his cheek. The words were still professional, but the tone pinged something suspicious deep in his chest.

Jason scrolled quickly to the top of the page. “What’s this snotwad’s name again?”

“Bradley. Bradley Young.”

Jason grunted, then looked up to hand back the tablet. Tim had a way of hunching his bony shoulders up and sinking down into his own frame like a turtle. Damian didn’t cower or hunker, but he had his own way of going very still and hard, like a soldier awaiting a punishing blow. He was sitting that way now, his gaze carefully averted from Jason’s scowl.

That decided it.

Jason pushed off the counter with another grunt. “Give me a couple days,” he said.

Damian looked up. “What?”

“A couple days,” Jason repeated. “A week, tops. But you have to stay in Gotham until then.”

And if Jason couldn't fix things in a week, Dick would be back from his Titans business, and it would be his problem. Or Bruce's.

Jason crossed to Damian's duffel bag and picked it up. Damian followed warily.

"What are you going to do?"

Jason shrugged. "Maybe nothing. But right now, I've got to get you back to the Manor before someone accuses me of kidnapping you. Come on."

It took three days. One day of research and backdoor data mining and two days of surveillance, just to be sure. Three days for Jason to verify that Bradley Young was more than just an easily hateable prick in Toms and a polo with too many buttons undone.

On the fourth day, Alfred was surprised and more than a little suspicious when Jason offered to pick Damian up from school. Not as suspicious, however, as the monitor was when Jason roared through the pickup line on his motorcycle.

Jason shot the woman a beaming smile straight from the Robin days and watched with satisfaction as she melted a little.

Still got it.

After she verified that the Wayne residence had called ahead with permission, she pointed him in the direction of Mr. Young's class. It was Damian's last class of the day, and it seemed the boy had been held back for some reason.

Jason kept his sunglasses on and his jacket collar pulled up as he strode down the hall. He didn't want to risk being recognized as Jason Todd, supposedly dead boy. The students streamed past him, and he found himself marveling at how small they all were. They were kids, sure, and with the combined grades, some of the older kids weren't far behind Jason, but even the older ones seemed unbelievably young. He knew he had been their size once—smaller, even—but it felt so long ago.

Jason had only attended for a few years before his death, but it smelled the same. Body odor and hormones, flop sweat and cleaning supplies. Faint undertones of weed and new books. Hope and desperation and fear and boredom.

Jason found Bradley Young in class sitting at his desk, arms folded, a self-satisfied smile on his face. Across from him sat Damian, his head bowed over a sheet of paper that he scribbled at furiously. His jaw flexed murderously with each stroke, but when he looked up at the movement in the doorway, Jason caught sight of his eyes. They were red-rimmed and burning with a fierce dryness that Jason knew from experience was as close to crying in public as Damian would allow himself.

Bradley Young straightened in his chair, then stood. “Can I help you?”

Jason leaned against the doorframe, thumbs slung casually through his belt loops.

“I’m here to pick up the kid.” He jerked his chin toward Damian.

“You’re not Mister—“

Jason held up the green, creased slip of paper between his fingers. “Got the slip from Mrs. Bauman. Gremlin, let’s go.”

Damian began to rise from his chair, but Bradley waved him back down before standing himseld.

“I don’t think we’ve been introduced. I’m Bradley Young, Damian’s history teacher.”

He crossed the room, hand outstretched. Jason ignored it.

“And you are?” Bradley prompted.

“Todd,” Jason replied, after a quick glance at Damian.

Bradley waited for a last name, an indication of relation. Jason gave him none.

“Well, Todd,” Bradley began, careful to stress the name in a way that made it sound less than genuine, “I’m afraid young Damian’s gotten himself into some trouble today and hasn’t been cleared to leave.”

Jason cocked his head to the side just enough that his temple rested against the metal of the frame. “Trouble?” he echoed.

“Yes.” Bradley was the embodiment of the solemn authority figure now, his mouth drawn into a somber line and his eyes deep with sorrow. *Such troubling news I bring you,* those eyes said. *To be the bearer of such disappointment is such a burden to bear.*

“Damian was caught cheating during an exam today.” The words were said with such pity.

Jason eyed the teacher steadily. “Did he.”

Bradley waited for an outcry of dismay that never came, then hurried on. “It is my belief that a teacher should be a friend to his students, a mentor, a champion. I don’t like the disciplinary side of my job, but…” He waved a vague hand through the air. “Cheating is a serious offense. I’ve given Damian the chance to make up some of his credits by writing me an essay.”

“An essay.”

“On the effects of European technology and advancement on the Middle East in the nineteenth century.”

That prick.

Jason looked past Bradley to Damian, who was listening with fists clenched. “Wait out in the hall.”

“Damian needs to finish—“

“The hall, D. Now.”

Jason kept himself slouched against the door, but angled just enough that Damian would be able to slip by. As the boy brushed past, book bag slung over one shoulder, Jason looked down at him and winked. Then he stepped fully into the room and shut the door.

“Mister… Todd. I really should be discussing Damian’s problems with a parent, not… whatever you are.”

Jason’s lips pulled back to flash bright teeth. “That’s alright. We’ll discuss yours.”

“My—“

“Sit down, Bradley.” Jason gave the man a push back toward the desk.

“Sir, I really must pr—“

“Sit. Down.”

Jason was doing pretty well with his Pit sobriety lately. He hadn’t killed anyone in ages. He aimed for the knees, relied more on threats

than outbursts, and had been quietly but steadily working to dismantle the drug trade in Gotham, including business done through his own cartel. He felt more centered than he had in ages.

Still, he didn't think it was wrong to enjoy the bright flare of fear in Bradley's eyes as Jason clamped a hand on his shoulder and forced him to sit.

"Bradley, Bradley, Bradley," Jason crooned. "Can I call you Brad? That's what you're all about, right? *Just call me Brad?* Being the cool teacher, everybody's buddy, making problems go away?"

Jason's grin widened as he perched on the edge of a desk. "Well, today's your lucky day, Brad. Because *I'm* here to fix *your* problems."

"My…" Brad gasped, then seemed to rally himself. "My only problem currently is Damian's flagrant misbehavior. That boy causes daily disruptions in my class, has no respect for rules or order—"

"No," Jason interrupted smoothly, "you have several problems. Your first is that you're a shitty teacher."

Brad—stupid, pretty Brad with his artfully gelled hair and his undone bowtie—tried to rise to his feet. Jason slammed him back down, then planted his boots firmly on either side of Brad's chair. The teacher gaped.

"I looked over Damian's past assignments. Not only are they all copied from the internet, but some of them are just plain wrong. You couldn't even be bothered to check Wikipedia, dude? At least that site gives citations and references. You straight-up henpecked a couple words into Google and called it a day."

Jason leveled a finger at Brad's nose. "Shitty. And you should be ashamed. You're a teacher, man, have some respect."

"I—"

Jason bulldozed on. "If that were all, it wouldn't be so bad. Teachers, right? You're overworked, underpaid, and expected to do everything on your own time. So you cut a few corners. I could work with that. But you. You're worse than that. You're a bully."

Brad was shaking his head. Jason was nodding his.

"Hey, it's warm in here. Do you mind?" Jason didn't wait for an

answer before stripping off his leather jacket.

It was dramatic of Jason, maybe, to pause and let Brad take in the full width of his shoulders, the corded muscles of his bare arms, and the many scars that looped and knotted across those muscles. Whatever. At least he came by the dramatics honestly. It wasn't like he'd come in full costume.

"Where was I? Oh yeah. Bullying." Jason gripped the edge of the desk and leaned forward slightly. Brad leaned back, eyes wide.

"You hate Damian. I get it. Kid's a lot to handle. Arrogant, brash, pigheaded, know-it-all. A lot like his dad."

A lot like his dad. A lot like his mom. It was enough to drive anyone up a wall. Even without the Pit, Jason still would've taken a shot or two at him back in the early days.

"But that's not your issue with him, is it?" Jason pressed. "I think it's more the fact that you're an insecure, racist dirtbag who never made it past third grade social studies."

Brad open his mouth to protest. He didn't get far.

"That's trash, man. Total trash. Picking on the brown kid because he's lightyears smarter than you'll ever be." And he was. Damian was a pill and a half and sometimes Jason fantasized about tossing him out his apartment window, but he was a smart kid. And he was… he was a *kid*.

"But," and here Jason leaned in even closer, "that's not your biggest problem."

Jason had to admit, so far Brad was handling the little shakedown pretty well. He'd lost several shades of color, and his leg was jittering uncontrollably under the desk, but other than that, the little twerp was holding himself together. No doubt he was planning on reporting Jason to the authorities and spinning the full tale of how he had been accosted and threatened by a thug related to that troublemaker Damian Wayne.

It would have been a decent plan. Until Jason pulled out his phone.

"Your biggest problems, Bradleykins, is that you're stupid. Stupid and sloppy."

Jason swiped through his photos, then turned the phone around so Brad could see the shots.

“If you’re gonna try to be Mr. Friendly to the high school kiddos, Brad, the least you could do is teach them the fundamentals of *hiding* their drug deals. Basic educator respect, man.”

It had all been so unbelievably, monumentally stupid. Not just working as a drug dealer in his own school, but running those deals openly enough that Jason could snap the photos in under a week of surveillance. It was enough to make a person despair of the entire educational system.

“Th-That, those pictures they prove nothing.”

Oh great, he was trying to bluff. Brad was swiping through the photos, desperately clutching at the shreds of his composure. Maybe it would have fooled a local yokel, but not anyone with any brains. And definitely not Jason.

“You can’t see what we’re holding. It’s just a bag. It could be anything. Maybe I’m lending the kids some supplies. I’m a teacher, for god’s sake.” Brad pushed his hair off his forehead and tried to stick Jason with some direct eye contact. “Take it to the police if you want, Todd. You’ve got nothing.”

Jason laughed. It depressed him sometimes, how predictable lower level crooks could be. He didn’t know how B dealt with the inanity day in and day out. Thank god for the rogues, he guessed. That said, sometimes the goons could say the darnedest things, and it was nice to enjoy the giggle.

“The police? You think I’m going to turn you over to the cops?”

Jason laughed again and enjoyed the way the sound stripped another layer of color out of Brad’s cheeks.

“Brad, Brad, Brad. Sweet, innocent Brad. If you were just anyone, maybe that’s the route I would’ve gone. The photos may not be enough to convict you, but they’d be enough for a search warrant of your class, car, and probably your home, too. But I’m not going to do that.”

“Y-You’re not?” Brad breathed.

“No, of course not,” Jason crooned. “Why would I do that when I

could send these straight to the Red Hood?"

Brad's reaction was gratifying, to say the least. No one, not even little dummies like Brad, could be a drug dealer in Gotham City and not know about Red Hood. The mythos blanketed the city. The duffel bag. The shoot-outs. The mystifying escapes. And the cardinal rule: Never deal to children.

"No," Brad rasped. "Please. Please don't. *Please*."

Jason had held his smile the entire conversation, but now he let it drop and stared at Brad Young.

Steph had told him once, shuddering all the while, that he had a way of looking at a person when he was well and truly angry. There was the eye thing, sure, but it was more than that. In the right light, when he tipped his head and all the hounds of hell seemed to come screaming out of the dark inside him, it was like being stared at by a skull.

Jason had laughed at her at the time, then gone home and had a week's worth of nightmares. He hadn't been able to shake the image. Now he hoped Brad would be able to say the same.

"I would've gone to the cops," Jason said, voice barely scraping above a whisper, like a breeze over a chilled tombstone. "I would've gone to the cops and let them hash it out, just to get you out of this school and get these kids a halfway decent teacher. But you made this problem yourself, because of one massive mistake. And do you know what that mistake was, Bradley?"

Brad shook his head, one quick jerk to the side like a neck being snapped.

Jason reached out and fisted his hand around the man's collar, hauling him close until they were nose to nose.

"You screwed with my brother."

Jason gave the man a shove and sent him sprawling back with a clatter of metal desks and plastic chairs.

"You have six hours to get out of the city. Quit your job, get out, and never come back, because when those six hours are up, these photos are going to the Hood."

Jason stood and shrugged his jacket back on. He stared down at Brad, lips twisted in disgust. “The only reason you’re even getting those six hours is to set a good example for the kid.”

He left Brad shaking on the floor and strode out into the hallway. Damian was waiting.

Jason eyed the boy. “How much did you hear?”

Damian shrugged. All of it, Jason would bet. No one in their twisted little family could pass up an opportunity to eavesdrop.

“You know this does nothing to fix my grades, correct?” Damian asked as he trotted to catch up. “I will still have to relocate."

“O ye of little faith. I hacked the system as soon as you left my place. You didn’t get full marks, just what you really earned. Some of your work was subpar.”

Jason gave Damian’s spiky little head a shove. “Come on. If I’m late getting you home, Alfred’ll accuse me of stuffing you full of fast food or something.”

“*Are* you going to stuff me full of fast food?”

“Heck yeah, little man. And if you squeal, you’re dead, capisce?”

“As if you could catch me."

Chapter End Notes

All of the birds have been helped. The 5 is complete. Now for the +1. :D See you next Thursday for the final installment!

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

> *Jason was pretty sure he was going to die, and he was surprised to find he regretted it.*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jason was pretty sure he was going to die, and he was surprised to find he regretted it.

When he had first come back, Jason had swung wildly between fearing death and running straight into its arms again and again and again. Some days he had fought back that empty dark, terrified to be swallowed whole, terrified to be spat out once more. Other days he had been too reckless and enraged to care. He had challenged death, daring it to take him again.

Jason had expected that when death came for him in earnest, he would be angry. Angry that life dare try to push him out into the dark. Angry that death try to rob him again of everything he was owed, of all the time he deserved to have.

Or scared. Jason had pictured himself feeling scared, hollowed straight down to his shoes with a sickening anticipation, like a skydiver kneeling on the wing of a plane. Scared to fall into what he couldn't remember. Scared to be ripped away.

Turned out he wasn't either of those. He was angry to be caught, sure. Angry at himself for being dumb enough to be where he was. Scared in a distant way of pain and suffering, yes.

Mostly, though, Jason just felt regretful. He regretted the things he would never get to do. The feelings he would never get to express. The words he would leave unsaid. There was so much left, and he was out of time.

Well, almost. One thing was for sure, he hadn't expected to have this much time to think before the actual dying. Then again, Jason couldn't be sure how much time was really passing. The drugs were doing weird things to his perception, stretching and slowing time, then making it snap back into place like silly putty pulled too fast.

Jason sucked in a raspy breath and tried to focus. He'd sort of tuned out when the demands started. Hear one set of demands, hear them all, really. Usually he tried to stay in the loop to glean what he could about his captors. Use it against them down the road. But once they'd started demanding cooperation from Batman, Jason knew there wasn't any point in paying attention.

Batman didn't negotiate. Not even for Jason. Maybe especially not for Jason.

He really should focus, though. Give himself some dignity in his final moments. Then again, hard to have dignity with a thick string of bloody drool dangling from your lips, wasn't it? Yeah, dignity was for chumps.

Someone grabbed his face. Jason didn't like that. A rough hand jerked his chin upward, and he flinched against the stabbing glare of the lights. Geez, whatever they'd stabbed into his neck must've been the good stuff. His head was throbbing so bad his vision was nearly strobing.

He could have hidden behind the drugs, but something primal in the back of Jason's mind struggled. There was a reason he needed to look. He needed to look up. And focus. It was like a voice yelling at him from far away, lost beneath the roar of an oncoming train. He couldn't save himself, but there was a reason…

There was someone on the other side of the lights who needed to see he was okay.

Jason sucked in another breath and winced at the rattle. Not good. Not his problem for too much longer, though, so that was fine.

The pain in his chest poked a tiny hole in the fog, and he lunged for the opening, using all his energy to focus past the lights. To stare into the camera lens that gleamed in the shadows.

Jason's lips twitched, then he managed a smile with teeth slick and stained with blood. There. That was defiant enough. It would look good in the highlight reel. And hopefully was enough to convince everyone on the other side that he was… not *okay*. But himself, at least. He wasn't scared.

When he died, he wouldn't be scared. Not like last time.

The hand let go of his chin, and Jason let his head drop. It was a relief

to let his hair shadow his eyes and block out the piercing light. To drop the smile that had been more exhausting than anything he could remember. He wished he could lie down, but his hands were chained and suspended above his head, so no chance of that. Or some water. He'd straight-up kill someone to get this dead-rat taste out of his mouth. Maybe he could give a go at sleeping upright. Sleep sounded pretty good.

What had he been… Oh, right. Focus. Listen.

"… or maybe we'll torture him into giving up the location of your headquarters and leave his corpse on your doorstep."

Oh. Bad time to listen. Should've gone for the nap.

If they were going to kill him, Jason would rather they just hurry up and do it already. Torture really wasn't necessary. It wasn't just unnecessary, it was tacky. It was—

Jason couldn't completely stop the grunt that dropped from his lips with the first punch to his ribs. Or the wheeze when, after several more hard blows, a rib snapped. But he didn't make a sound when the idiot snubbed out his cigarette on Jason's collarbone. Jason had learned to take that one as a little kid.

Like, up your game, dude.

There was a roar of laughter, which was good. Laughter meant the talking was done. Sure enough, a moment later, the lights flipped off. Jason let out a quiet sigh of relief as the last of the pain in his eyes eased. It was nice to have at least one body part that didn't hurt so much.

Jason jerked as dry, cracking lips appeared next to his ear, so close that the crusty flakes brushed against his skin as the mouth spoke.

"Your days in this town were numbered the second you turned tail and joined the Bat," the lips hissed. Their breath smelled like Doritos and morning funk. Jason bore the intrusion stoically and more than a little woozily.

The lips continued on, "*Maybe* the Bat comes through. And maybe we kill him." There was a cackle that the lips probably thought sounded menacing but was more asthmatic than anything else. "Doesn't matter, because we're gonna pump you dry."

Torture it was, then.

Bruce had never given Jason lessons on withstanding torture. It was one of the few areas where he had been startlingly, blatantly unwilling to give instruction, even though preparing Jason might have meant the difference between safety and discovery for the secrets of Batman.

“Tell them,” he had ordered Jason, his mouth set into a grim line. “Don’t try to be brave. Hold on and trust I’ll come for you, but if you’re given the choice between being tortured or telling our secrets, I want you to tell them.”

Later, the League had filled in where Bruce had faltered. Jason could withstand anything now. Would withstand anything, both on principle and because no way was he giving these schmucks the keys to Alfred’s basement. He would tell nothing, and he wouldn’t trust that Batman would come. That kind of hope could break a person faster than any tire iron.

Thankfully, these particular schmucks were amateurs. Jason had faced worse in training. They’d given him too much of the good stuff, making it easy to slip away from the yelling and the pain. Seemed a shame to waste what time he had left, but what was a guy supposed to do?

When Jason came back to himself, there was still shouting, but it seemed different. He took stock, trying to figure out if it was worth staying or if he should slip under once more.

The drug that had been a hinderance and then a blessing was back to being a curse. Jason’s consciousness filtered back into his body slowly, creeping down to settle in his limbs and reinhabit his broken frame. With awareness came a nauseating rush of pain, but Jason pushed it back and struggled to open his eyes.

The world had lost all definition, the torture and the drugs reducing it to wildly swinging lights and deep shadows. Men spun around him, crying out orders to each other, weapons waving blindly. There was yelling in the room with him, but also yelling further away. There were running feet and… gunfire. And the distant sound of thudding bodies. But no familiar voices. Jason couldn’t hear his rescue coming. That’s how he knew it was.

The far door burst open in an explosion of wooden splinters. He couldn’t see what was happening beyond. The camera lights had been

turned on at some point, then knocked over. The beam slashed diagonally across Jason's torso and face, blinding him.

He couldn't see his cavalry, but he could hear them now. Familiar voices calling to each other, barking out orders, leveling threats. The drugs must have been stronger than he thought, though, because some of it didn't make sense.

Missions usually had chatter, banter, even on a rescue mission. Batman didn't participate, but he let the others sound off, knowing the babble let off steam. At least, that's what Jason figured. But the noise circling the room didn't sound like banter. It sounded angry.

"Where is he?"

"Hood!"

"What have you done to him?"

"Where's our brother?"

"Over there!"

"Oh god, Hood."

"Batman!"

Jason could see a little better, he discovered, if he squinted out of the eye still partially in shadow. He could see the team tearing ruthlessly through the mass of armed men. Batman led the charge, flanked by the Robins. There was a blur of purple behind them in the doorway that had to be Spoiler. They were almost to him, faces hard with purpose.

Then an arm snaked around Jason's neck from behind, and the burning muzzle of a gun pressed to his temple.

"Stop!" ordered the lips.

Everyone stopped.

Jason hiccuped fitfully and struggled to suck in another gulp of air. The arm tightened.

He wasn't scared. Batman would stop them somehow, maybe, and if he didn't, well. That was that. Jason just hoped the kids looked away in time. No one needed to see a mess like that.

“You come after me, his brains end up on your shoes.” The lips laughed, a shaky sound already creaking off its hinges. “You touch me, he dies. Only way to stop me is to kill me. And Bats don’t kill. Everybody knows Bats don’t kill.”

Jason managed one long, slow blink, enough to wrestle his eyes into focusing on the shadowy form opposite him. Batman stared back, opaque lenses open for once, blue eyes burning like stars.

Dick?

Sure enough, it was Dick’s jaw that pulsed as he measured the situation, Dick’s gloved hand that reached back to warn the Robins to hold. Dick’s face set hard enough to crack stone behind the heavy cowl.

Ah, Dickie. I’m sorry.

Dick’s gaze held Jason’s for a heartbeat longer, then returned to his captor. It felt like a goodbye.

“Take him,” Batman growled. Jason closed his eyes.

For a second, Jason thought nothing happened. Then the arm around his neck slithered off, and both the body it was attached to and the gun jammed against his head fell to the ground with a thump and a clatter. Jason opened his eyes and looked down to blink disbelievingly at the weapon.

A mask ducked under his arm from behind, featureless except for the crooked stitching across the lower half. Jason didn’t know how he knew Cass was smiling, but he did.

Safe, she signed, hands fluttering like moths. **Safe.**

Other hands were reaching for him, bodies swarming forward en masse to envelop him. Good hands. Good bodies that smelled of sweat and leather and Alfred’s favorite detergent.

“Get him down, get him down.”

“Careful!”

“Watch the—“

The chains were unhooked from the ceiling, and Jason fell, legs crumpling without support. It didn’t hurt, like falling in a dream, a

soft, weighted glide. Arms encircled him, catching him before he could hit the concrete floor. Jason let his cheek rest against the cold molded kevlar of Batman's armor.

I got no strings to hold me down, to make me sad or make me frown…

It was a stupid song to have stuck in your head while dying, but it fit how Jason felt. He was unspooling in Dick's arms. How embarrassing.

"Jay. Jay!"

"Put him down." That was Tim's voice, cutting through the chaos, sounding firmer than Jason had ever heard before. "Batman, put him down. Spoiler, your—"

"On it, Red."

Jason was placed on something slick and cool. He could recognize the feel of a Cave-supplied cape anywhere, even with his eyes closed. When he breathed, his tongue tasted like Stephanie's perfume.

There were hands on his side, pressing close to where the cattle prod had stuck him. Jason jolted and tried to pull away.

"Easy, easy there, big guy. It's just me."

Tim. Just Tim. Tim wouldn't hurt him. Jason was pretty sure. Not with Dick here, right?

No. He was *sure*, even through the haze of sedatives. Jason huffed out a rasping breath and tried to relax.

"We're gonna get you back to the Cave, but I need to make sure you're stabilized first," Tim was explaining. His fingers were running deftly over Jason, finding every bruise, every broken bone, every wound. "Did they give you something?"

Jason managed a nod. "Sedative 'f s'me kind. Neck. Nice b'zz."

There was a tight snort somewhere off to the side, and the sound eased a little of the pressure in Jason's chest.

"Anything else I should know?" Tim asked. He was ripping open the gash in Jason's thigh to examine the pen knife-length puncture wound.

Jason grunted as gauze and then weight were pressed to the

laceration. He thought about the question, then slurred, "'m thirsty."

If Tim chuckled at all, the noise was lost beneath Dick's clipped commands. Black Bat was dispatched to find water and Spoiler was sent to assist Robin. The hand that slipped from Jason's must have been one of theirs. It was quickly replaced by one much larger.

"I'm sorry we weren't faster," Dick murmured. "I'm so sorry, Jay."

"S'fine." Jason paused to hold his breath as Tim slid a hand under his skull to feel for bumps. The movement made him dizzy, but once his head was resting on the cape again, he mumbled, "G'd not to b'dead. 'gain."

"Oh good, he's making dead jokes. He'll be fine," Tim announced.

"Batman." That was Damian in the doorway. Jason bet if he opened his eyes, the kid would be standing at attention.

"The perimeter is secure. All personnel have been restrained and sedated until arrival by the authorities. Spoiler is standing guard."

Jason did crack an eye open at that. "Y'drugged 'em?"

Damian's focus swung to Jason with the force of a searchlight. Instead of standing at full attention, he was just inside the doorway, surrounded by the fragments of wood, hands clenching and unclenching spastically.

"Yes." The word was almost spat and drenched in venom. But not at Jason. "They are fortunate I did not resort to harsher methods."

Cass was back, slipping past Damian with a paper cup in her hand. She knelt next to Dick.

"Just wet his lips," Tim instructed. "Sorry. You'll need to stay on an empty stomach until we get back to the Cave, just in case."

Surgery protocol. Made sense. But Jason wanted to whine like a child when Cass rubbed water on his lips with her finger and then lifted the cup away.

"Okay. Let's get him to the car. But be careful. He has broken ribs here and here, and there's some abdominal swelling I don't like. Could be internal bleeding."

Jason could hear the crinkle of wrappers as Tim packed up his kit. A

hand settled on his shoulder and applied the barest pressure into a squeeze, then rose again.

Arms slid under Jason's shoulders and knees, then lifted, making him hiss.

"I know, I know," Dick soothed. "Easy, Little Wing, easy. I'm sorry. We'll get you settled in the back as quick as I can. The doc's meeting us at the Cave, and we'll get you all patched up."

They were moving. Jason had closed his eyes to keep the room from spinning, but he could see the slow strobing of lights against his eyelids as they passed through the abandoned warehouse and headed outside. He knew if he opened his eyes, he'd see Dick stepping over bodies scattered like after-party refuse, each hogtied and unconscious on the bare concrete floor.

"D." He should call him Batman. No names in the field. But he wasn't Batman. He was Dick.

Dick grunted.

"Th' guy. Back there. How…"

Take him. Jason had thought he'd been talking to the thug. About Jason. But then the arm… *Bats don't kill. Everyone knows Bats don't kill.*

"Black Bat." Dick's voice was low, hushed. It didn't rumble in his chest like Bruce's, but more hummed at the base of his throat. "Slipped in from behind. Took him out at the C4."

Cass had paralyzed a man to save Jason?

"S'not dead." Jason hadn't realized he'd said the words aloud until Dick grunted.

"No. Some days he might wish he was, but he'll live a long, full life at Blackgate." The sound changed as Dick angled his head to look down as Jason. "Sorry to disappoint."

Jason huffed a laugh out his nose. "G'mme your blue blanket. C'll it square."

"Deal."

The response came so immediately that Jason almost laughed again.

They were outside now, the air filled with the distant cry of sirens. Gotham's finest were on their way to clean up the mess.

"Batman, is Hood going to be okay?" Spoiler asked as she fell in step with the others.

"Yes." Dick's tone brooked no argument. Jason would be okay if Dick had to drag him into health with his bare hands. "We'll have him patched up and on the mend in no time. You can head home."

"No. I'll follow you back."

Next to the Batmobile was the usual scuffling over seating, but to Jason's fading ears, it all sounded briefer and more subdued than normal. The only flare-up was a preemptive strike by Damian, who insisted on being the one to sit in the back to monitor Jason on the ride home.

Blessed dark cocooned Jason as Dick, Damian, and Tim maneuvered him into the small hold in the back. Jason bit his lips until it bled to keep from crying out as his broken body was passed from hand to hand, but finally he was settled on the seat. Damian crawled in next to him, then cushioned Jason's head in his lap. Jason could feel a small hand settle hesitantly on his crown, fingers sinking into the matted curls.

From the driver's seat, Dick said, "We'll be home soon, Jay. Just stick with me. The doc and Alfred will have you patched before Bruce gets back from Dubai."

Right. He'd known about that trip. That explained why the thugs had gotten a cowled Nightwing instead of Boss Bat. Why big brother had come storming the gates.

Jason dragged his eyes open just enough to look over at the hazy silhouette of his brother backlit against the moon.

"D. Th'nks. For coming."

Dick's hand snaked back behind his chair, grabbed Jason's dangling hand, and squeezed.

"Every time, little brother. Every time."

Jason tightened his fingers around Dick's before the other man pulled away. Outside the Batmobile, twin engines revved as Steph and Cass

kicked their bikes into gear. Damian settled back against the seat, hand still enmeshed in Jason’s curls, and Tim’s hand replaced Dick’s, his fingers pressed to Jason’s pulse point. They were all warm, these hands, warm and soft like being cradled in sunlight.

Beneath him, the Batmobile roared, but the sound faded from Jason’s ears as he let out a long, deep sigh. Soon enough, they would arrive at the Cave to bright lights, metal implements, and healing pain. But for now, he was safe. He could sleep. So he did, surrounded by family.

Chapter End Notes

> The end! Thank you all for coming on this hurt/comfort tour with me. :) I hope you enjoyed the ride! (And that the ending lived up to your expectations, because wow did you all really like last week's chapter.)
>
> 2025 ETA: I've started posting "behind the scenes" looks at the process of writing fics over on Tumblr. Here's the one for this fic: https://lurkinglurkerwholurks.tumblr.com/post/743243498076127232/chapter-six

End Notes

So, good news! This fic is finished! All chapters are written so I can focus on the next chapter of N&N (bless you patient souls.) New chapters of this fic will go up every Thursday or Friday until finished, so make sure you subscribe to get each new update.

But whuff, getting this thing in order almost did me in, so much love and thanks to my willing cheerleaders out there. You Know Who You Are.

And lastly, the fic title comes from "Hey Brother" by Avicii. Natch.

ETA: Not so lastly anymore! If you like this fic, specifically the Tim chapter, I very much recommend checking out The Return: https://archiveofourown.org/works/23726839

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!